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Religion in the ancient Greek city



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THE ELEUSINIAN MYSTERIES

Our final example of a Panhellenic shrine has the distinguishing feature of being both an official cult-place tightly controlled by the Athenian state and a site for the expression of individual piety open to all speakers of Greek, not just Athenians. The prosperous town of Eleusis was an independent community to begin with, but at the beginning of the sixth century or possibly even the end of the seventh it was absorbed into the state of Athens. In the process the sanctuary of the Two Goddesses (Demeter and Persephone) and the Mysteries celebrated therein passed into the control of the Athenian 'King' Arkhon, who had overall responsibility for traditional cults.

The two local aristocratic families of the Kerykes and Eumolpidae were allowed to retain their hereditary priestly prerogatives, but that did not hinder the city of Athens from exercising a more or less direct influence over the life of the sanctuary and the organization of the cult. From the end of the sixth or beginning of

the fifth century the emoluments of the Eleusinian priesthood were centrally regulated (the Hierophant – see below – was probably granted a financial allowance from public funds), and the rules to be followed in certain sacrifices were laid down, with the Council of 500 meeting the day after the Mysteries to adjudicate possible breaches. During the third quarter of the fifth century a board of *epistatai* was established centrally to keep accounts of the sanctuary's property, and there are documents showing that throughout the fifth and fourth centuries the Athenian state maintained a special interest in the Eleusis shrine.

Another piece of evidence to the same effect is the successful speech written and published by the politician Andokides in his own defence in 399 against a charge of sacrilegiously placing a suppliant's branch in the Eleusinion (sanctuary of Demeter and Persephone) at Athens itself during the celebration of the Mysteries:

We were returning from Eleusis; the information [*endeixis*] had been lodged. The King Arkhon according to tradition presented himself before the Presidents [*prutaneis*] of the Council to make his report on the conduct of proceedings at Eleusis. The Presidents said they would introduce him to the full Council and told him to summon Kephisios and myself to attend at the Eleusinion where the Council was obliged by a law of Solon to sit on the day following the Mysteries. We duly attended, and when the Council was in session, Kallias son of Hipponikos [a member of the Kerykes and Andokides' chief accuser] stood up in his ceremonial robes and announced that a suppliant's branch – which he displayed – had been placed on the altar. The city-herald [Eukles, below] then asked who had placed it there, but no one replied. I was there, though, and in full view of Kephisios. When no one replied, Eukles here, who had come out to enquire, went back inside. Call Eukles for me. Eukles, are the facts as I state? Do you testify. [Evidence of Eukles.] I told the truth, then, as has been testified, and the truth of the situation is quite the opposite of what my accusers claim. They, as you will recall, have stated that the Goddesses themselves caused my wits to go astray and made me place the branch in the sanctuary in ignorance of the law, in order to punish me. But I, gentlemen, maintain that, even if every word of the prosecution's allegation were true, I was rather saved than punished by the Goddesses. Suppose that I really had laid the branch there and then had not replied to the herald's proclamation: would it not have been I myself who was bringing about my own destruction by placing the branch, and would it not have been by

my silence – a piece of good fortune for which I clearly had the Goddesses to thank – that I was saved? For if the Goddesses had indeed willed my destruction, I ought surely to have done the reverse, that is, made a confession even though I had not actually deposited the branch. As it was, I neither replied nor had I in fact placed the branch. So when Eukles reported to the Council that no one had confessed, Kallias stood up again and declared that a law of our ancestors condemned to death without trial anyone who placed a suppliant's branch in the Eleusinion; it was his father Hipponikos who had once interpreted the law in that sense, and he, Kallias, understood that it was I who had placed the branch. Forthwith Kephalos here jumped up and said: 'Kallias, most impious [*anosiotatos*] of mankind, first you offer an exegesis of the law, something which is not legitimate (*hosion*) for you as a member of the Kerykes. Then you speak of an ancestral law [enjoining the death-penalty] when the pillar beside you prescribes a fine of 1,000 drachmas for placing a suppliant's branch in the Eleusinion. Finally, you say it was Andokides who put it there – but who told you that? Summon him before the Council so that we too may hear this allegation.' The text on the pillar was then read out, and Kallias was unable to say who his source was. It thus became evident to the Council that it was he himself who had placed the branch. (On the Mysteries 11–16)

According to the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*, most of which dates from the period before the Athenian takeover, the Mysteries were founded by Demeter herself when, during her prolonged wanderings in search of her daughter Persephone (or Korē), she stopped a while at Eleusis as a guest of King Keleos. In her honour the people of Eleusis constructed a great sanctuary, and Demeter taught them the sacred rituals for alleviating her mourning and celebrating her power:

With sharp pangs pain gripped her heart, and she tore the bands covering her ambrosial hair with her own hands. A dark cloak she threw around her shoulders and sped like a wild bird over land and sea in search of her. But none was willing to tell her the truth, neither god nor mortal man; nor did any bird of omen come to her as a messenger bearing true news. For nine days, then, queenly Deo wandered ceaselessly over the earth with flaming torches in her hands, so grief-stricken that she refused ambrosia and the sweet draught of nectar nor would bathe her body in water ...

[The Sun god finally tells her that Hades has abducted Persephone, with the consent of his brother Zeus. She is received in

the home of Metaneira and, being entrusted with the royal infant Demophon, she tries to render him immortal by rubbing him with ambrosia and concealing him in the fire. But she is caught in the act by the queen, who breaks the spell]:

But lovely-crowned Demeter was angry with her, and with her divine hands she snatched from the fire the dear son whom Metaneira had borne unlooked-for in the halls and hurled him onto the ground, raging with anger in her heart. And straightway she addressed deep-girdled Metaneira thus: 'Ignorant, senseless humans, who never foresee your destiny, whether good or ill! You in your folly have wrought incurable harm. For – and I swear the oath of the gods, by the unappeasable Styx – I would have made your dear son deathless and ageless all his days and endowed him with imperishable honour. As it is, he can in no way evade death and the fates. Yet shall an imperishable honour be his always, because he sat upon my knees and slept in my arms. When the years revolve and he is in his prime, the sons of the Eleusinians shall wage continuous war and dread strife with one another. But I am that Demeter who receives honour, the greatest source of wealth and joy to immortals and mortals. Come, let the whole people build me a great temple and an altar beneath it, at the foot of the akropolis and its high wall, on a prominent hill above Kallikhoros. I myself will found my Mysteries, that hereafter you may piously perform them and render my heart propitious.' So saying, the goddess changed her stature and form, thrusting away old age. Waves of beauty spread around her, and a delightful fragrance wafted from her perfumed clothes, and from her immortal flesh a beam of light shone afar, while golden tresses fell down onto her shoulders, so that the solid house was filled with radiance as if lit by lightning.

[The following day, King Keleos summons his people]:

So calling to assembly his numberless people, he bade them build for thick-tressed Demeter a rich temple and an altar on a prominent hill. And they made haste to obey and hearkened to his words, doing as he commanded. And the temple grew great as the divine will desired. Now when they had finished it and were quit of their heavy task, every man returned to his home. But golden-haired Demeter sat there apart from all the blessed gods and remained, pining for her deep-girdled daughter. Thus she caused for mankind the most terrible and cruel year of all over the much-nurturing land. The earth would not even bring forth the seed, since well-crowned Demeter kept it hidden. Many a curved plough was drawn over the soil by the oxen in vain, and much

white barley fell fruitlessly upon the earth. Thus would she have destroyed the whole race of mortal men with cruel hunger and robbed those who occupy Olympos of their glorious honour of offerings and sacrifices, had not Zeus noted and marked this in his heart.

(*Hom. Hym. Dem.* 40–50, 251–80, 296–313)

[Zeus then intercedes with his brother Hades and secures his permission for Persephone to return to her mother on earth for a part of each year; but the remainder of the year she must spend down below in the Underworld with her captor-husband.]

The chief priest of the Mysteries was the Hierophant (*hierophantēs*), who had to be a member of the *genos* of the Eumolpidae. His principal function accorded with the etymology of his title: it was to show (*phainein*) the sacred objects (*hiera*) at the culminating point in the ceremonies. But he also presided over all the other most solemn moments of the ritual, beginning with the recitation of the formula that threw the Mysteries open to all Greek-speakers and barred from them ‘murderers and non-Greeks’. Next to him, the priestess of Demeter, who had to be of the *genos* of the Philaidai, occupied the cult’s most ancient and prestigious position; indeed, she disputed with him the right to perform certain of the sacrifices. The *daidoukhos* (‘Torchbearer’) accompanied the Hierophant in the opening ceremony of the Mysteries; he had to be a member of the *Kerykes* (‘Heralds’) *genos*. The same *genos* provided the fourth most important functionary, the ‘Altar-Priest’, who supervised the completion of the ritual. These four, like some of their assistants, held their positions for life, and in return they received important privileges such as *proedria* (the right to an honorific front-row seat in the theatre) and remuneration, on a scale commensurate with the ever-increasing fame of the Mysteries in the course of the fifth and fourth centuries.

The Mysteries followed a complex ceremonial pattern, divided into several stages located at different places and occupying two separate moments of the year. Every person who could speak some Greek, male or female, free or slave, provided only that his or her hands were not sullied (through the commission of some crime, especially murder or sacrilege), could become a candidate for the status of *mustēs*, that is, an initiate of the Mysteries of Eleusis. He or she thereby embarked on a long period prepara-

tory to induction, with the guidance of *mustagōgoi* and under the surveillance of the cult’s *epimelētai*. This preparation consisted of a multiplicity of ritual actions, including fasting and retreats, undertaken with the encouragement of the initiates of the preceding year and under the eyes of the participants in the festivals.

The first stage was accomplished in spring, in the month of Anthesterion, when the Little Mysteries were held at Agrai near the central area of Athens. These represented the first grade of initiation, an indispensable preliminary to presenting oneself for the Great Mysteries at Eleusis itself. They were presided over by the King Arkhon, assisted by the religious personnel of Eleusis and members of the sacerdotal families, and culminated in the solemn sacrifice for the Two Goddesses that accompanied the ritual ablutions of the would-be *mustai* in the River Ilissos.

The Great Mysteries took place six months later, in Boedromion, and lasted for ten days. First, the *hiera* were transported in round boxes (*kistai*) from Eleusis to the Eleusinion at the foot of the Akropolis of Athens. At least in the Classical period this solemn procession was accompanied by ephebes (eighteen- and nineteen-year-olds doing compulsory ‘national service’), but the procession itself, like the Little Mysteries, may have originated as early as Athens’ incorporation of Eleusis and symbolized the imposition of central control. The arrival of the *hiera* was solemnly notified to the priestess of Athene Polias before an assembly of magistrates and priests in the midst of a huge crowd.

The Mysteries properly speaking began at the full moon on the next day, Boedromion 15, which was called *Agurmos* (‘Gathering’, *sc.* of the initiates and initiands) or *Prorrhēsis* (‘Proclamation’, *viz.*, that of the official opening by the Hierophant assisted by the Torchbearer). Those deemed to be qualified were then admitted within the Eleusinion after being purified. The following day was named *Halade Mustai* (‘To the sea, initiands!’) after the shout that accompanied its principal ritual, the procession of the initiands to the sea at Phaleron where they each sacrificed, burned and scattered the ashes of a ‘scapegoat’ pig to cleanse them of their pollution. They then took a purificatory dip in the sea, dressed themselves in new clothes and crowned their heads with myrtle-wreaths before returning in procession to the city, where yet another purificatory sacrifice was held.

On Boedromion 19 the *hiera* were taken back again to Eleusis in the most solemn of all the Eleusinian processions, and participants were spaced out all along the twenty kilometres that separated Athens from Eleusis. At its head was carried the statue of Iakkhos (a by-form of Dionysos), followed by the wagon carrying the *hiera*. Then came the priestly personnel, the candidates for initiation, the members of the Areiopagos and the Council of 500 and other magistrates, and behind them the citizens ordered by tribe and deme. Bringing up the rear was a crowd of onlookers attracted by the festival's reputation. The goal of the procession was the Hall of Initiation (*Telestērion*), which in the fifth century could accommodate up to 3,000 people on its benches. It was *inside* this building – unusually for a Greek ritual but *de rigueur* for a mystery-cult (*mustēria* means 'secret things') – that the Mysteries proper took place.

Only duly prepared *mustai* were eligible to participate in the ceremonies, which lasted for three days. They began with a solemn sacrifice to Demeter and Korē within the enceinte of the *peribolos* wall; to this were admitted only last year's initiates, who together consumed the sacrificed flesh on the spot. A ceremonial formula reported by the Christian writer Clement of Alexandria marked the entry of the initiands into the *Telestērion*: 'I have fasted, I have drunk the *kukeōn* [a potion of water, barley-groats and mint with which Demeter had consented to break her fast in the palace of King Keleos], I have taken from the *kistē* [box] and after working it have put it back in the *kalathos* [open basket]'. Behind this enigmatic declaration many interpreters have wanted to see the manipulation of model genitals, but if we are to believe Theophrastos (as cited by Porphyry, *On Abstinence* II.6.2; cf. Delatte 1954 [170]), it was perhaps rather a mill that was in question, symbol of the blessings brought by Demeter that gave mankind access to the life of 'milled grain'.

With the entry of the *mustai* into the Hall of Initiation began the part of the ceremonies about which there was a rule of absolute secrecy. Since the ancients scrupulously adhered to this rule of silence, all modern attempts at reconstruction are based on the calculated indiscretions of Christian writers or the allusive and metaphorical remarks of philosophers like Plato. Perhaps what happened was that dramatic representations involving

Demeter, Korē and Zeus led up to the final climactic ceremony, the *epopteia* ('viewing'), in which the *hiera* were brought out of the Anaktoron (a sort of chapel within the *Telestērion*) and shown by the Hierophant to the *mustai*. The identity of these 'sacred things' has caused a great deal of ink to be spilled. Were they objects related to Demeter's 'gift' of the ear of wheat? Or models connoting sexual fertility? Or *xoana* (ancient aniconic statues carved from wood)? Despite the ingenuity of modern hypotheses and reconstructions, we shall no doubt never know the answer for certain. On the next day, the festival ended with a final *panēguris*.

The value of the initiation process in the eyes of the Greeks, apart from the significance of each of its stages, doubtless lay in its long period of preparation and in the progression towards the final revelations in the Hall of Initiation. These revelations consisted partly of visions and partly of oral instruction, that is, interpretations or homilies delivered by the Hierophant; together they constituted the *aporrhēta*, the 'unrepeatables'. But what sort of 'revelation' did this secret initiation entail? The *Homeric Hymn to Demeter* culminated in the promise of a different and happier afterlife for initiates: 'Blessed is he who, among the earthbound men, has been privileged to see these mysteries. But he who has not been initiated into the sacred rituals and does not participate in them has no like destiny, once he is dead, among the watery darkness' (479–83). On the other hand, Aristotle (as cited by Synesius, *Orations*, p. 48) affirmed that 'initiates are not required to learn anything; rather, they receive impressions and are put into a certain frame of mind, after having been suitably prepared.' Initiation in the Mysteries, then, apparently did not involve instruction of a dogmatic nature, but was rather a process of internal transformation, founded upon the emotional experience of a direct encounter with the divine. One of Plutarch's characters expresses himself thus (*On the Obsolescence of Oracles* 22 = *Moralia* 422c): 'I heard these marvellous things, precisely as one does during the initiatory rituals of the Mysteries, except that there was no demonstration, no visible proof of their formulas.'

These revelations were of course addressed individually to each of the *mustai*, but they also concerned the community of

initiands as a whole that was gathered in the *Telestērion* and united by its shared experience; and, moreover, they reached out to embrace the wider community of all past initiates. The exaltation of the newly initiated was further reinforced by the mass gathering of the populations of Athens and Eleusis as a whole, assembled in their constituent bodies, and by the presence of all those who had come from outside Attica to participate in the festival. Thus the initiation, so far from separating the new *mustai* from their broader social context, was itself sustained and valorized by that external matrix.

Nor were the Eleusinian Mysteries a unique phenomenon within the Greek religious tradition. Both the secrecy, which contributed so much to the prestige of Eleusis, and the idea of mysteries itself, that is, the notion of gaining access to revelations denied to non-initiates, could be experienced in other cults, for example in the mysteries of Dionysos or of the Great Mother (Phrygian Kybele). As for the mystical dimension of the personal encounter with the godhead and the accompanying revelations, that may be compared to the religious experience involved in Dionysiac worship, on the one hand (chapter 13), and Orphism, on the other (chapters 4 and 12), even if these three means of approaching the divine were by no means equal in their status or identical in their objectives. The particular *éclat* of the Eleusinian Mysteries, therefore, was doubtless due to the importance of the ancient cult of Demeter, which the Athenian state celebrated with such pomp, no less than to the experience of mystic emotion, which was itself as much a collective as an individual phenomenon.

This civic context of the ritual must be kept firmly in mind if we are not to distort the meaning and value of mystery-cults for the Greeks. What must be avoided at all costs is treating them as if they were a religion apart, 'other' than the civic religion, and endowed with a spirituality of a superior kind, on the grounds that, from the standpoint of modern western civilization, the religious attitudes of the initiates appear closer to those held by spiritual monotheists. For it is that perspective which has so often led to false interpretations of the Eleusinian Mysteries, as indeed of other aspects of ancient Greek religion.